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Routinizing Lexical Phrases on Spoken Discourse

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Abstract

This paper examines the effectiveness of routinizing lexical phrases to a group of second language learners. A group of proficiency class students were drilled or routinized with semi-fixed and fixed phrases which are commonly used in problem-solving group discussion. Basic frequency counts and interview were carried out to see improvement in learners' communicative ability and how the lexical phrases benefit them. The learners can use a number of phrases appropriately in several group discussions. Thus, the practice of routinizing lexical phrases which is based on the lexical approach can be applied in second language learning.

Keywords: Routinizing, Lexical phrases, Communicative ability, Group discussion

1. Introduction

In today's globalized world, everyone is surely aware of the importance in mastering the English Language. English is officially recognized as the international language for business and corporate communication and for university students, in particular, realize that they need to write and speak well in English in order to secure a good job after they graduate. This is especially true in Malaysia where English is the second language which is used widely in many working sectors especially in business correspondence with international companies.

However, after so many years spent in schools learning the language, the performance of Malaysian students, especially the Malays in the rural area, is still poor. Although some are competent, many others do not achieve acceptable level of competence even after they graduate from the university. The primary concern is the spoken language of the learners because for many occasions, they need to communicate well in English. Sadly, the Malaysians students fail to do this due to poor language proficiency.

So how do we overcome the problem? Perhaps one of the ways to improve the spoken language among Malaysian students is by adopting a new approach in language teaching and learning that is the lexical approach.

The lexical approach is the new kid on the block in language teaching and learning. This approach is flexible that is it can be applied in either first or second language classroom. It makes use of prefabricated sequences or lexical phrases as primary units in language teaching. The lexical phrases are either complete or partially pre-assembled units which are treated as wholes. If the phrases are fixed in memory, they will be ready-made chunks which can be easily retrieved for fast language production. Thus, learners can easily use the phrases especially when they have inadequate linguistic resources to express themselves (Porto, 1998). Moreover, since the lexical phrases are stored as wholes and readily accessible, learners do not need to focus on grammar when using the phrases and they can shift their attention to features such as appropriateness, coherence and relevance and maintain the flow of conversation (Porto, 1998). Lavelle (2000) believes that the incorporation of seeing, hearing, writing, speaking and practising lexical in a language can increase learners' fluency and improve sophistication in English.

According to Foster (2001), an advocate of the lexical approach, students should be exposed to drilling or what she termed as 'routinizing' of lexical approach. Foster (2001) suggests the idea of routinizing the lexical phrases to language learners instead of applying the usual traditional way of teaching grammatical rules and regulations. The routinizing practice may help the learners to understand the use of the language outside classroom and prevent confining students' knowledge on only certain elements in the language. It is commonly known that the teaching of English language has been narrowed down to the use of idealized patterns in the ESL classroom which are rarely found and used outside the classroom. Students are often given examples of sentences that simply adhere to the formal rules such as "She goes to

school every day" and " "He did not come to class yesterday" but not something like "Let's take time for coffee" and "This is the moment of truth, time to start talking hard facts". This is actually an unfair treatment of teaching language especially to the non-native speakers of English. In addition, Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) believe that students should be routinized in using orchestrated language chunks or lexical phrases of varying length as routines and ritualizations are pervasive agents in language behaviour. Although by routinizing lexical phrases will make learners memorize only the intended phrases, the importance of grammar is not neglected (Nattinger and DeCarrico, 1992)

Kavaliauskiene and Janulevieiene (2001) discuss the steps that they take when using lexical phrases in teaching ESP subject. First, they make students aware of the existence of Lexical phrases by developing learners' strategies for dealing with unknown lexical items. Then they help the students to identify lexical phrases by making students analyze a number of authentic passages, each of which contain the target lexical items. Moreover, they suggest a follow-up to ensure acquisition of high frequency ESP lexical phrases, among others; first checking comprehension, that is through the use of fill in the blanks exercise; second providing more practice such as assigning students' projects and group tasks, third, revision and consolidation whereby students are given various class activities (like matching pairs, role-play, pictorial schemata, oral presentation and writing summaries). The activities are carried out through lapses of time to ensure the learners permanently remember the phrases (Kavaliauskiene and Janulevieiene, 2001). According to Foster (2001), routinizing lexical phrases in the classroom is deemed useful to enhance fluency. Thus, this throw some light on the writer to present this paper which will examine the effects of routinizing lexical phrases on a spoken discourse (associated with communicative ability in group discussion) among second language learners in a Malaysian tertiary institution.

The main objectives of this study are:

(1) To analyze whether routinizing lexical phrases helps in improving communicative ability in group discussion.

(2) To examine whether the number of lexical phrases of routinized lexical phrases increases in group discussion.

(3) To investigate students' perception in using the routinized lexical phrases in group discussion.

2. Methodology

This is a non-experimental and investigative study on UiTM students' use of lexical phrases in group discussion.

The participants consisted of 21 UiTM Perlis campus undergraduates who were pursuing a diploma in science. The students were in their second semester and were taking Preparatory Course for MUET which was a second semester English proficiency course at the university. The participants on the whole could be categorized as having intermediate English proficiency.

As part of the proficiency course requirement, the students had to undergo a speaking test which consists of individual presentation (task A) and group discussion (task B). The two tasks were done consecutively. The lexical phrases used in group discussion such as "I think you're right about that', "I agree up to a point, but...", "Could you be more specific" and "May I interrupt?" were routinized on the students. First, the students were divided into six groups. Then they were drilled with phrases used for asking for and giving information, expressing agreement/disagreement, asking/giving clarification and others in a duration of three weeks. The students were introduced and explained about the use of the phrases and repeatedly reminded to use the phrases in the group discussion. The students in their group of three or four must discuss on a topic for ten minutes. All the group discussion practices were similar to the actual test especially the third practice where they were given only two minutes to prepare for their response and 10 minutes for the discussion. In their group, they had to discuss three or four options/suggestions and find one best solution to overcome a problem (problem-solving task). In the duration of the three weeks time the students practiced their group discussion three times before their actual speaking test. The researcher recorded the number of lexical phrases used by the students, assessed the students' communicative ability and handled an interview.

3. Results and discussion

To find out whether routinizing lexical phrases helps to improve the communicative ability of the students, the researcher observed their performance and compared the average marks of the groups' communicative ability. The communicative ability of each individual was assessed based on UiTM group discussion speaking score guide which ranged from "0.5-does not show ability to communicate" until "3.0 shows ability to communicate very competently". It was found out that the average communicative ability marks for the group which used many phrases was more than the groups which used less phrases. The highest average mark was 2.5 (=shows ability to communicate competently) (table 1)

Moreover, it is interesting to note that the most frequent use of lexical phrases during actual test were those on agreeing (table 2). This is perhaps due to the fact that the students wanted to be polite and showed respect of others' point of view.

To find out whether the number of the routinized lexical phrases increases in the discussion, the frequencies were

recorded (table 3). The least number of lexical phrases used was during the 1st round. This practice was done when the students were just introduced to the phrases. The number increased to 48 when they were drilled with the phrases and reminded to agree and disagree in the discussion. However, the number dropped to 40 in the 3rd round. At this stage, students had to perform the discussion exactly like the actual test. They could not do well in the practice. They were panicked, had no ideas and could not communicate well. It seemed that this affected the number of lexical phrases used in the discussion. Surprisingly, the number of routinized phrases increased in the actual test that is 51. It was observed that the students could support well their arguments with relevant supporting details. They did not only focus on the content ideas but also were careful in uttering the phrases. Most of the students could perform and communicate well in the discussion, consequently used a lot of the routinized lexical phrases. It can be concluded that with adequate practice and enough ideas, students will definitely use the routinized lexical phrases.

To investigate the students' perception in using the routinized lexical phrases in group discussions, an interview was carried out on two of the groups. They were asked these questions; "Do the phrases help you in the group discussion?", "How does it help you?". These are the students' responses:

- Easy to interrupt
- Easy to give opinion
- Become more polite
- Give more confidence
- Feels comfortable
- Get more ideas
- Get the momentum to start arguing

Generally, students feel good when they could use the phrases especially among a few who were weak in the language. This is because they could be able to contribute in the discussion with the help of the lexical phrases. The phrases boosted their confidence and made them easy to give opinion, at the same time, prevented them from being hostile to each other. When using the phrases, they could take turn to speak and thus, maintained the flow of the discussion. They were also confident to speak because since many of the phrases were fixed ones, grammatical mistake could be avoided.

4. Conclusion

The findings of the study suggest that routinizing lexical phrases on students' spoken discourse can be an effective way to improve students' communicative ability. Students who used appropriate phrases can communicate well in group discussions. If routinizing lexical phrases is done in lapses of time, students can memorize the chunks and produce them in their language. In addition, exposing and routinizing authentic phrases in group discussions will benefit second language learners not only during their proficiency courses, but also in any future problem-solving task situation.

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Table 1. The number of lexical phrases and average marks for communicative ability

Groups	Lexical phrases	Communicative abilty
Wan Adi's group	9	2.5
Harinnic's group	12	2.5
Athirah's group	9	2.37
Afiza's group	6	2.25
Fariha's group	10	2.3
Zulfadhli's group	5	2

Table 2. The frequency for different types of lexical phrases

Phrases	Frequency
To agree	21
To partly agree	9
To disagree directly	2
To disagree indirectly	5
To be neutral/not sure	0
To ask for clarification	6
ToGive clarification	0
Others	8

Table 3. Frequencies of lexical phrases in group discussions

Group discussions	Frequency
During 1st round	29
During 2nd round	48
During 3rd round	40
During actual test	51